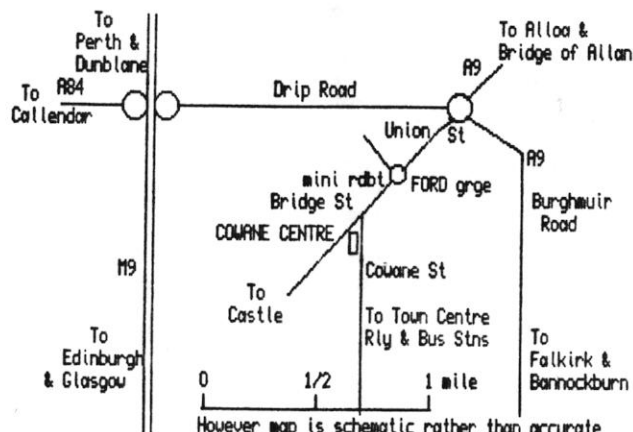


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GETTING TO COWANE CENTRE, STIRLING



Travellers from Edinburgh or Glasgow use SECOND exit marked for Stirling
Entrance to Cowane Centre for vehicles is off Bridge Street

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Scottish QL Users Group

SQLUG NEWSLETTER

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Apologies for the tardiness of the last newsletter, which was due to a combination of circumstances. Hopefully everyone got their copy by the Saturday before the meeting - important due to the change of venue.

Last-minute news of the next All Formats Computer Fair in Glasgow City Hall - this will take place on 8th March (10am - 4pm). EEC Ltd gave us a batch of £1-off tickets for the last one, but they arrived too late to be sent out. Those purveyors of Exotic Electronic Components will again be present on 8th March, as will Miracle Systems, but I don't know about any other QL suppliers.

I mentioned previously that we should perhaps consider the merits of affiliation to the British Association of Computer Clubs (BACC). The information is now to hand, which states that affiliates must have an elected committee and be non-profit making. The latter is no problem, but for the former we would need to draw up a constitution and hold formal elections. The 1991 cost of affiliation was £19 for local groups and £34 for national - which are we?! Comments anyone???

LAST MEETING: MAYFIELD CENTRE, STIRLING, 16TH FEBRUARY

Our enforced change of venue from the Cowane Centre to the Mayfield Centre, due to renovations of the former, was not without its benefits. The Mayfield Centre is quite modern, in decent decorative shape and not too difficult to locate - not to mention that we were getting the room free of charge because of the inconvenience. The caretaker seemed surprised that we would consider anywhere else, suggesting that the Cowane Centre should have been demolished long ago. Rivalry apart, we now have two possible Stirling venues to consider.

As we were setting up our QLs, it occurred to me how different each person's setup was. This was mainly because I had just built my QL a new home out of black-painted plywood. The idea was to cut down on all the plugging and unplugging that is required, a notion which is not new to SQLUG members. For instance, John Skelton eliminates disassembling his system by bringing along the complete desktop - with QL, its power supply and assorted disk drives fixed in place, along with the CL video digitiser and another hefty power supply for the drives, rescued from a dead PC. John Shaw carries his QL around in a case which looks custom built for the job - the QL, power supply and disk drives fit snugly, and the whole thing closes into something like a brief case. I had looked for a long time for something similar, and it was lack of success in this search which drove me to make my own.

When John Shaw arrived with his QLs, it was clear that not all was well. His QIMI-modified QL, which had been behaving erratically, had finally decided to give up the ghost. It seems likely that all the fiddling with the ill-fitting mouse interface has caused some other damage to the computer. Alan Wilson mentioned that the problem with the QIMI interface's legs being too short is well known, but reportedly the current stock will continue to be sold. It would be best to wait a

while therefore, until the next batch of (longer-legged) interfaces come on-stream.

If you have already committed yourself to the current QIMI interface, the following tip from Robert Thomson of Hamilton may be very useful. He suggests buying blank chip sockets (40-pin and 24-pin) to fit onto the appropriate short pins on the underside of the QIMI interface. This will equip the interface with longer and more bendy legs, so that insertion is much easier. The only problem is that this raises the height of the interface so that it could interfere with closing the QL's case. Therefore buy the cheapest chip sockets, as they tend to be the thinnest - as thin as 3mm. Robert reports using this technique to fit successfully quite a few QIMI interfaces.

When we got round to loading software, the first on the list was a demonstration, by Alan Wilson, of QDesign, the latest graphics package from Jochen Merz Software. Unfortunately, the demonstration got off to a bad start when the package refused to boot up on my QL. The advert for the program says that it has been tested on QL ROMs JS upwards, but the manual is somewhat more revealing, suggesting that AH and JM ROMs are not suitable. Alan had found the program to work perfectly on his JS QL, but none of the AH or JM QLs present could be persuaded to load the software. Luckily, John Shaw had brought along his backup QL, a JS, so we were able to get the package loaded eventually.

QDesign, like all Jochen Merz programs, makes full use of the QJUMP Pointer Environment, and sufficient extensions are included with the package so that you do not already need to own QPAC2. The actual drawing area is a window covering most of the area of the screen, with menus selectable at the top and icons down the left side. The drawing area is scrollable, so that the effective area is much larger. A condensed view of the entire area can also be viewed.

Selecting icons gives access to conventional drawing functions such as box, circle, triangle, etc. What I found really impressive was the text facility. There are two modes to this - you can either use normal QL fonts in any of the available CSIZES, or use vector fonts. The idea behind vector fonts as I understand it, is that a definition is stored for how each character is drawn (in terms of lines and curves, rather than dots), so that the larger the size of the character, the more accurate it appears on-screen. Compare this to enlarging a normal QL character - the larger it is, the more blocky it becomes.

QDesign is the first program for the QL to use vector fonts, whereas drawing / DTP packages for PC/Atari/Amiga/Archimedes/Macintosh computers have used vector fonts for some years. Is the QL catching up at last? The test of this would be in the printout, but here we struck problems. Whether John Shaw's printer was not entirely Epson compatible or the DIP switches were set unusually I don't know, but it certainly did not want to communicate with QDesign - emitting loud beeping noises. In view of all the possible incompatibilities, Alan intends to bring along his own setup in future, on which he knows that QDesign works, and give a repeat demonstration.

Another new program to be examined was ADVGEN, by Andy Pritchard and supplied by C.G.H. Services. As you might expect, this program enables you to generate your own adventure games, using a new programming language called ACL (Adventure Control Language). The sort of games one can produce are quite sophisticated - including text and graphics, and allowing for more than just verb-noun input from the player. The Epic Adventure program was written using this system.

There are already two specialised adventure-writing utilities

available for the QL, namely Quill Adventure Writer, by Gilsoft, and Digital Precision's Adventure Creation Tool. Whether there is any need for a third system is doubtful, since the interest in QL adventures has declined steeply in the last few years (even a well-reviewed adventure would be lucky to sell more than a few dozen copies a year).

The first thing that must be said about ADVGEN is that it is daunting! The format and symbols used by ACL are not even slightly intuitive. Therefore, the manual must be read (and re-read) carefully. Unfortunately for us, we had no printed copy, so it was necessary to multitask Quill, with the document (29 pages long) loaded, alongside the ACL editor, ADVed. Initial attempts at using Taskmaster were unsuccessful, but QPAC2 managed to multitask both without any problems.

First impressions of ADVed are that it is a very sophisticated text editor - the layout is also neat, using italics for printed text and non-italics for commands. The editor has many more features than you might expect in an adventure editor, including searching, cut and paste, import-export, etc. - it even allows you to set the clock! Having said that, the ACL commands appeared inscrutable, though looking again at the manual since the meeting, the logic of the thing is beginning to sink in.

Although ADVed gives a favourable impression, we considered that the system would have been much more appealing if the author had constructed some form of "front end" to shield users from the complexities of ACL. This is the approach that Quill Adventure Writer takes, allowing non-programmers to create adventures. However, those willing to put in a bit more effort should find ADVGEN much more flexible, and I haven't even mentioned the graphics capabilities.

Our PD Index disk, plus 60-odd disks of Freeware were again being put to good use, and by using multitasking, the library was examined very efficiently. To elucidate, Archive is used first to search the index disk for programs of potential interest. For example, I searched on "view" to find file-viewing programs.

Next, it is time to switch over to Quill and load in the appropriate _doc file from the appropriate disk. Since many of the documents are in German, frequent switching to the German-English Wordlist program can be necessary.

Finally, if the program sounds interesting, it can then be started up from SuperBASIC. Once it has been evaluated, Archive can be called up again, and the process repeated.

The upshot of my search for file-viewers is that the only suitable one was from the German disks, and like most German software, requires Pointer Environment extensions. There is such a wealth of utilities on the German disks that it seems worthwhile investing in QPAC2 to access them.

NEXT MEETING: COWANE CENTRE, STIRLING: 15th MARCH; 11am-5pm

This will give us a chance to view the improvements to the Cowane Centre and decide whether there is anything to choose between the two Stirling venues. In case you haven't been to either before, I should mention that both provide hot water for making tea, coffee, pot noodles(!), etc. At this meeting we hope to explore QDesign further and get some hard-copy this time. I could demonstrate the newly completed STtoQL program, for converting Atari ST screen files to the QL, based on the utility I wrote for the PD library, but since then taken to new heights by Rich Mellor.